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IS THE ANALOG IN THE REAL?

PHILOFICTION ANALOG, DIGITAL, MEDIA, REAL

I've been talking recently with Beatrice Fazi about a structuralist theory of the digital. In my experience, the majority of digital theory today is essentially empirical in that it tries to understand words like "digital" and "analog" by looking at the world and writing descriptions of what one sees there. At the same time there's a small contingent of folks — I count myself among them — who want to do it a bit differently. Instead of relying on empirical methods like observation and description, we might also turn to theories of language, ideology, representation, and even metaphysics. Following that path, a number of quickly questions arise. For instance, if

digital code is a kind of language, does that put digitality under the heading of rationalization, logical structure, symbolic representation, and the symbolic order more generally? And likewise, since the analog tends to resist symbolization, does that mean analogicity is somehow extra- or sub-rational? Is the analog the natural domain of contingency, randomness, impossibility? Does the analog resist representation? *Is the analog a synonym for the real?*

It's a challenging question, one that doesn't have a simple answer. I've been scolded in the past for suggesting that the analog has a relation to the real. And while it's easy to fall into a romantic trap where the analog comes to mean pure nature or some kind of purely authentic presence, I also think it's wrong to discard the real entirely. (In fact this "romantic trap" can be leveraged for use by digital tools, as in the example of random number generators using trigonometry to tap into the pseudo-chaotic nature of continuous values.) Because of these challenges, it's best to address the question through different registers rather than offer a single pat answer. (tl;dr: yes I do think the analog is on the side of the real.)

Let's begin with the hard core analog position, for example the position taken up by Deleuze. The hard core analoger will say: analogicity is equivalent to the real. He will say you don't have language/symbolic systems at play in the analog real. Maybe you have a *primitive* form of representation, but it's not actual representation, it's just repetition maybe, or propagation. Or maybe it's just some other kinetic event, like a change in intensity, a line of flight, a machinic cut through an assemblage. Let's call this the "naive" position on the analog real.

The problem with the naive position, as I've already hinted, is that it ends up in a rather boring, traditional form of dualistic metaphysics, where the analog is the real and digital is the symbolic. In this dualistic view digitality is the natural domain of representation (all representation, in other words, containing an inherent digitality), while analogicity is the place where representation doesn't happen, or if it does we have to use different words for that process, words like "transduction," "emergence," and "singularity." This isn't necessarily the end of the world. But it's also probably not that appealing.

A more subtle take is to acknowledge that the digital and the analog are *both* forms of representation, even if they perform representation in different manners. I use the word "co-equal" to talk about this, as in "digital and analog are co-equal modes of mediation." Here transduction isn't a pale alternative to representation; transduction *simply is* a form of representation. "Analog representation" would thus not be a contradiction in terms, but rather a way to talk about changes in energy and matter — for example sound could be understood as a representational system where pressure changes in the air may be represented as changes in electrical voltage — along with any number of other things like echos, mirrors, shadows, molds, or traces. From this perspective, analog representation is in fact ubiquitous rather than rare or impossible.

So it's easy to play Switzerland. Digital and analog are co-equal on the question of representation. Both domains have representation, even if representation looks different in each. Still, I think we can go another step farther to obtain a more satisfying conclusion. Here's where

we can fold the original “naive” posture back in: Digital and analog are both forms of representation, but the analog is *on the side of the real*. (I realize the phrase “on the side of” is pretty vague, but I think it best captures this complex relation.) Saying “the analog is on the side of the real” is a hedge that allows us to acknowledge the unique characteristic of the analog. The analog is a mode of mediation. But it also undeniably has a relation to the real, the impossible (as Lacan says), randomness, the irrational, the continuous, etc. in ways completely inaccessible to the digital. So the digital and the analog are co-equal in the *fact* of representation, but different in the *how* of representation.

One final complication is the question of standpoint. As is frequently the case, it really matters where you’re speaking from. If you’re speaking from the standpoint of the digital — from within metaphysics for example, or within structuralism — the analog real will always be defined in terms of some lack or absence. It will be hard to see the analog as co-equal. Likewise, if you narrowly inspect analog representation *strictly as representation* then you’re inspecting its “digital” aspect, a digital quality mixed into it. (Since everything is usually some analog/digital mixture, these mixed aspects are not uncommon.) And from that view, the analog will appear as a kind of primitive or underdeveloped form of digitality.

The challenge of different standpoints is one reason why I’ve come to differentiate between Digital I and Digital II — the added jargon is admittedly onerous but here it seems necessary. Digital I refers to any kind of difference whatsoever. This is legible even in analog transduction, which displays a difference or “twoness” that spans an interface. Digital II, on the other hand, assumes basic difference but also requires a second element, a symbolic economy that organizes and integrates differential tokens. I maintain that you can’t find Digital II in transduction, echos, mirrors, or other forms of analog repetition/propagation/representation. As even Deleuze himself admitted, there’s no language in the analog, except for a language of “expressive movements, paralinguistic signs, breaths and screams.” Which is to say a language formed exclusively of real elements.

So is the analog in the real? The short answer is often yes. A slightly longer answer is *not really*. The analog is a mode of mediation “on the side of the real” even if it’s not synonymous with it.

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